

“In our time grant us your peace.” Once we’ve stripped away the formal bowing and scraping that often accompany our Collects, that’s the nub of it today, that’s what we want from God. It sounds almost desperate.

Most Saturday nights lately I don’t sleep that soundly. I wake up early and simply can’t return to real sleep. This morning at 4:15, having written this sermon (or thought I had) yesterday, I kept repeating those seven words like a mantra or an incantation: in our time grant us your peace. Repeating it over and over expanded my attention from “peace” (the center of the center of the prayer) to the pronouns: it’s not just *our* peace that we seek, as in absence of war, but *God’s* peace, which is more positive, more than the absence of a negative. “In our time” certainly reverberates. That’s the almost-desperate-sounding part. We might be assured that God’s peace will prevail in the end, but we want it now, in our time, our children’s time.

There’s a question in today’s Gospel. The speaker was a man with an unclean spirit, or, more precisely, the speaker was the unclean spirit speaking through the man: “What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

The question came in a time when the scribes and Pharisees were meticulous about treatment of unclean spirits. They had nothing to do with them. Oh, there were rituals and sacrifices specifically designed to avoid engaging impurity and uncleanness of any kind. In the parable of the good Samaritan, for instance, the priest has to give the injured man a wide berth out of scrupulous adherence that principle. The problem that Jesus came to address was that the Pharisees’ zeal for purity often overwhelmed their concern for the essence of their faith. Put differently, they had come to confuse the means for the end—following the rules of purity instead of loving and serving God.

Yet again I interrupt myself to remind myself—and, well, since you’re here, to remind

you as well—that the scribes and Pharisees were not the bad guys in that society. They were the religious elite, the keepers of tradition and the most upstanding among the righteous. They understandably and zealously worked for the purification of the souls in their charge and, thus, for the betterment of their communities. In pursuit of that, unfortunately they had veered calamitously from their original aim.

So the unclean spirit assumes that the rabbi's primary concern would be to steer clear of it and the man it possessed. Maybe the pervasive tone of that day and age made it easier to hear that message: "What've you got to do with us anyway?" (It seems that unclean spirits speak in the royal "we.")

Jesus, however, wasn't like those religious leaders who had lost their way. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, talked with women at wells, even with prostitutes and other cast-offs, in order to remove all barriers to entering God's kingdom.

We're never told what the unclean spirit is in this story. I invite you to invent one—physical illness, mental illness, compulsion, greed, addiction, lust, dishonesty in general, to round up just a few of the usual suspects. Whatever might draw us away from God's love and into self-absorption and disdain for others.

In this story, unlike some others, Jesus doesn't say, "Go wash in this pool," or "sacrifice two doves" or even "speak to the priest." He simply and authoritatively expels the unclean spirit.

He brought peace to the afflicted man and, presumably, to those around him. His family. His neighbors. In their own time.

The story is recorded for us, even though no one on the scene could possibly have known that their encounter with Jesus would be told in gatherings like this two thousand years later. Whatever else the story tells us is that God can create peace in our minds, in our communities, in our world, in our time.

We need to recognize Jesus' authority, as the crowd did in that moment. We need to know what Jesus has to do with us,—with all of us and with every part of ourselves—the purest and the most unclean parts. He has everything to do with us, each of us and all of us together. He brings us his peace in our time, if we allow it.

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